

REPORT OF THE THEOLOGICAL FORUM

May 2015

PROPOSED DELIVERANCE

The General Assembly:

1. Receive the Report.

REPORT

1. Introduction

1.1 The Theological Forum was established by the General Assembly of 2013 'to resource, express and challenge the theology that informs the life and work of the Church'. Its remit is:

- a) To articulate and develop the doctrinal understanding of the Church in accordance with Holy Scripture and with reference to the confessional standards of the Church of Scotland.
- b) To express the theological vision of the Church in its worship, fellowship, witness and mission in and beyond contemporary Scotland.
- c) To respond to particular theological requests as and when these arise from the General Assembly, the Council of Assembly and the ecumenical partners of the Church.
- d) To draw to the attention of the General Assembly theological matters which the Theological Forum considers to be of pressing contemporary relevance.
- e) To stimulate wider theological reflection throughout the Church on key doctrinal, ethical and apologetic matters through the provision of appropriate materials and other activities.

1.2 The remit remains extensive and challenging. The Forum's first General Assembly report in 2014 was largely focused on one topic, the instruction from the 2013 General Assembly to explore the relevant ecclesiological issues informing the principles of the 'mixed economy' as set out in the 2013 Report of the then Theological Commission. This year too, our second year of operation, that issue has dominated the work of the Forum although our conclusions are reported elsewhere in this volume, in a Joint Report of the Theological Forum and the Legal Questions Committee, and in a contribution to a Report from the Legal Questions Committee on the solemnisation of marriages. Apart from that work, the Forum has responded to a range of requests for comment from Councils and Committees and has, whenever possible, arranged to meet Council Conveners, members and officials to assist them with the theological aspects of their work. The Forum met ten times in the course of the year and there was also extensive email communication between meetings. There was, in addition, a good deal of required reading - the Forum does, after all, have a number of academics among its number - so the diligence and commitment shown by my fellow members were very much appreciated. Our discussions were wide-ranging and stimulating but were characterised by a good deal of grace and good humour. The Church is fortunate to have such servants.

2. Issues

2.1 The General Assembly of 2014 instructed the Church and Society Council “to reflect theologically, in co-operation with the Theological Forum, on issues surrounding assisted dying...and report to a future General Assembly”. The Forum has spent time reading and reflecting on the matter and has identified the issues which it would wish to explore with the Church and Society Council. A sub-group of the Forum has now been set up to assist the Council with this work and initial discussions have been held. The Council anticipates that this report may require study for two years; the Forum will be pleased to contribute information and advice throughout.

2.2 The Church and Society Council also asked the Forum to comment on their response to the proposed Organ and Tissue Donation (Scotland) Bill and to provide theological comment to help inform the Church’s response to a Scottish Government consultation on a proposed Bill relating to burial and cremation and other related matters. The Forum is very pleased to assist Councils and Committees in matters of this nature but would make a plea that sufficient notice is given to allow due consideration.

2.3 With the Committee on Ecumenical Relations, the Forum has discussed two substantial papers. The first was the proposed response from the Church of Scotland to a paper from the World Council of Churches entitled ‘The Church: Towards a Common Vision’. In a wide-ranging discussion, the Forum offered comment and advice, which were welcomed by the Committee. The Forum also discussed with the Ecumenical Relations Officer an early draft of a ‘Common Statement between the Church of England and the Church of Scotland on the doctrine of the Church’, again offering comment and advice on a matter which has the potential to be of significance to both churches. The Ecumenical Relations Committee will report further on this document.

2.4 During the year, Rev Dr Donald MacEwan, a member of the Theological Forum, wrote the bulk of a new booklet

in the Mission and Discipleship Council’s *Learn* series: *New Communicants*. This will be the Church’s first resource for use with new communicants for quite some time and has the potential to be popular and engaging; the Council is to be commended for this initiative and for its willingness to work with Dr MacEwan and the Forum on the publication. Dr MacEwan spent some considerable time in the preparation and writing of this text and the Forum is deeply grateful for his work. Forum members also spent time discussing and commenting on the various drafts.

2.5 The Mission and Discipleship Council has extended an invitation to the Forum to present to the 2015 National Youth Assembly, an invitation which we were delighted to accept. The topic of the presentation or workshop has still to be determined but members of the Forum are very much looking forward to engaging with younger Church people on the theological issues which are of interest to them.

2.6 The Ministries Council reports elsewhere on the Church’s plans for the Decade for Ministry. As part of that work, the Council’s Pastoral and Vocational Care Task Group invited the Forum to comment on the theology of call. The Forum reviewed earlier Assembly reports on this matter, principally the 2000 Report on Ministers of the Gospel and another 2000 report from the then Panel on Doctrine, entitled ‘The Doctrine of Ordination’. The Convener and Secretary of the Council attended a meeting of the Forum and we explored in depth the meaning of the call in baptism to all believers, the difference, if any, in the nature of a call to various forms of ministry and the use of the sense of call in the assessment process in our own Church and in other denominations. Ministries Council were also keen to explore the changing nature of call throughout the later stages of a Ministry of Word and Sacrament. These are obviously significant issues and it has not been possible to produce a report for this Assembly. However, a small group of Forum representatives has been set up to assist Ministries Council in their thinking on these matters.

3. Future work

The Forum stands ready to assist the General Assembly and its Councils and Committees in any matter of theology and doctrine. Much of our work over the next year is expected to arise, as it did this year, from requests from Councils and Committees to comment on matters under their active consideration. We have committed to working further with Ministries Council on the theology of call and anticipate also further work with the Church and Society Council on the wide range of difficult issues which fall into its remit.

4. Thanks

The Forum is grateful to all those who have sought its views and listened so graciously to its comments. It is grateful too to those who retire from membership at this General Assembly: Dr Liz Grant, Rev Mark Malcolm and Miss Moyra McCallum DCS. They have been generous with their time and their contributions to the Forum's work have been insightful and very much valued.

In the name of the Forum

IAIN TORRANCE, *Convener*
FRANCES HENDERSON, *Vice-Convener*
PAULINE WEIBYE, *Acting Secretary*